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## Service-User Participation in Developing Social Services : Applying the Experiment-Driven Approach

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**Service-User Participation in Developing Social Services:  
Applying the Experiment-Driven Approach**

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**Abstract**

Participatory approaches are needed in Finland for service users to participate in designing and developing social services. New collaborative methods are the focus of this research, as this pilot case-study analyses the experiment-driven design approach and its consequences on service users' agency and participation. This practitioner research belongs to the pragmatist research tradition. The data comprises transcribed focus group- and individual interviews of service users and social workers in group operations in a Finnish municipal adult social service organisation. The data is evaluated by content analysis. The experiments with service prototypes allowed the service users to observe the consequences of their actions in practice. Instead of only being heard and consulted, the service users found they could influence the practice in concrete ways. The professionals and organisation shaped the service users' participation and agency by operating as gatekeepers in sharing power. The service users reported that collaboration with professionals and participation in the group gave them a sense of renewed citizenship, improved social skills and helped to manage with personal illnesses or daily struggles. The research concludes that experimentation can provide a way to utilise experiential knowledge in developing social work collaboratively.

## Introduction

In Finland, few practices and research exist concerning service users participating in designing and developing social services. Implementation of the collaborative approach for inquiry and developing services with service users has recently emerged in the field of social work practice research. The idea of service-user participation has generally been considered at the individual level (Närhi & Kokkonen, 2014, p. 105); elections have ideally provided ways for citizen participation as per the welfare state model. As team manager in the Finnish municipal social services, I have contemplated how service users could more directly participate in developing welfare services, and what would be the outcome of such participation.

I was motivated to involve service users in designing social services, on the one hand, to improve the quality of services and, on the other hand, to increase service-user participation and consequently extend democracy. As the purpose of this case study is to develop practice, it connects with the pragmatist research tradition in social work. Developing practices, operating with ends-in-view and utilising experimentation is characteristic pragmatist epistemology (Martela, 2015), but the ideas have been adopted also in social work practice research that ‘describes, analyses and develops practice’ (Austin et al., 2014). More specifically, this research belongs to practitioner research (e.g. Shaw & Lunt, 2011), as I developed and researched my own work in adult social services.

John Dewey (1997/1916, pp. 99, 305) believed extending our understanding of democracy and creating a new kind of participation could take place by applying experimental approaches in developing public institutions. In fact, Jane Addams implemented the experimental approach with citizens when founding and planning the activities of the famous Hull-House (Gross, 2009). More recently, the pragmatist ideas of experimentation in inquiry and learning-in-practice have inspired the commercial service design field aiming for increasing customer-value.

This made me question, whether the experiment-driven approach used in service design would provide a way to share power with service users in developing social services, while simultaneously responding to the expectations of current social service production.

In service design, experimenting with service prototypes or experiment-driven innovation approach refers to a systematic and iterative process in which, prior to further planning or final implementation, ideas are tested in practice (Hassi, Paju & Maila, 2015). Experimenting with service prototypes is one of many methods used in developing social innovations (Hillgren, Seravalli & Emilson, 2011; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010; Ronning & Knutgård, 2015). My previous positive experiences of developing services by experimenting with professionals (Muurinen & Lovio, 2015) led me to designing social services with a group of service users and professionals.

In this research, I investigate a group of social work practitioners and service users who are designing new service concepts in Finnish municipal adult social services. First, I analyse the service users' experiences of participating in developing social services. Second, I discover whether the experiment-driven innovation approach could provide a means for participation and collaboration. Within the parameters of this article, I focus on the consequences participating has on the service users, rather than its impact on the professionals.

The case study spanned the two three-month periods during which the group operated and the experiments were organised. The research data includes transcribed focus group and individual interviews conducted after each period. The group was summoned with a case study in mind, but there was also a recognised need for such an activity in the organisation. As Finnish adult social services can be characterised as being relatively bureaucratic and closed from direct involvement of the service users in its service development, the group was also a new

chance for the organisation. Next, I will describe in detail the concepts of participation and agency, the interest of the empirical inquiry.

### **Participation in Collaborative Action**

Social services are produced, influenced and shaped by the interplay of different agents. Humans shape processes unintentionally; non-human objects or the material environment can also influence practices (e.g. Latour, 2005). Thus, participants' agency in collaborative action is not always intentional or conscious acting. If agency is defined by the ability to shape practice and leave marks on action, it can be argued that service users constantly participate in the development of social services. For example, statistics report how much the services are used, and can direct how a practice is designed. Alternatively, a conversation with a client may guide a social worker to identify needs, or to propose a new form of service in an organisation.

Although service users participate in shaping service practices, they may be unaware of their own agency they have. In social work, participation is often perceived as an experience of service users. The research results report experienced exclusion, marginalisation and suspicion of an individual's capability to initiate change (Matthies & Uggerhøj, 2014; Pollock & Taket, 2014, p. 88) more often than having a voice.

Participation can be considered the experience service users have on their agency. To understand how this experience is formed, Dewey's (1950, p. 83) description is helpful. First the person acts. This leads to a change in the environment, which subsequently responds. The experience is created when a person encounters the consequences of their action. According to Dewey (1950), the 'close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing' the consequences is essential to form an experience. If a person does not undergo the consequences of

their action, the experience will remain partial and fragmented (Dewey, 2005/1934, p. 46) as is often the case, for example, with client feedback.

Sherry Arnstein (1969) has presented a model of participation as a ladder which demonstrates division of decision-making power. The rungs proceed from non-participation to tokenistic informing, consultation and placation. Partnership, delegated power and citizen control as the top rungs demonstrate pure citizen power. Decades later, service-user involvement in service development is still often criticised as mere consultation which does not offer real power in decision making to users, but rather reasserts traditional roles (Barnes, 2008, p. 462; Carr, 2007, p. 268; Cowden and Singh, 2007, pp. 15–16; Needham, 2007, p. 225). However, if service users are genuinely being heard, their participatory agency is likely to be strengthened, along with other rehabilitative outcomes for the individuals and their identity (Palsanen & Kääriäinen, 2015, p. 200; Valkama & Raisio 2013, p. 109; Videmsek, 2014, p. 68). The positive outcomes of improved self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are connected to recognition the experts-by-experience can receive ‘as persons whose individuality has been formed by their specific biographies’ (Honneth, 1992, p. 195).

Dewey (1997/1916, pp. 272–273) insisted intended changes can be produced and results analysed in experiments. Observing the intended and evident changes in practice can strengthen the sense of having agency. This kind of action reminds of the common social scientist description of agency as motivated, purposed, initiated and chosen (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962) rather than being unconscious, habitual or even a non-human contribution (e.g. Latour, 2005). Thus, considering the formation of an experience, the experiment-driven innovation approach appears an interesting alternative to strengthening service users’ experience of participation and sense of having agency. Therefore, my first research question is: *what consequences do service users recognise by participating in experimenting and developing services?*

If we accept human agency as being not only autonomous and free, since it is influenced by the structures and interdependent with other actors (e.g. Giddens, 1984; Latour, 2005), the level of service users' participation and their agency is also influenced by other agents. As Peter Beresford (2013, pp. 144–145) points out, service users must be granted power of decision-making for their participation in becoming democratic and empowering. This granting of power is an act of other agents who, then, in turn shape the service users' agency. Thus, my second research question is: *what kind of tensions were attached to the service users' relationships to other participants in developing social services?* Next, I will introduce the research process of the case study.

### **The Research Process**

The present research took place in a large Finnish city, where I work as a team manager. The adult social service organisation evolves and develops its practices continuously; it was consequently open to my research, making the inquiry possible. Two social workers, who were appointed to develop group activities on a full-time basis, were also interested in enhancing service-user participation. The three of us agreed to co-lead the experimental group. The group was summoned to develop new forms of services that would enhance clients' capability to function, both in their daily lives and in various social situations.

The group leaders invited participants who they had met through the organisation's group activities and who they knew had no other obligations. Knowing one of the leaders personally lessened the threshold to join the group. All participating service users were either long-term unemployed, retired or received some rehabilitation allowances. The participant group ranged in age between 30 and 65, and involved both men and women. Two social workers joined the two leaders and me in the group.

The process of experimentation began with defining a general aim; although the process was, however, simultaneously open-ended, both allowing ideas to emerge, and the group to take part in defining its goals. The group started with planning meetings, in which the idea of developing new activities was presented and participants' expectations were discussed. The group was first planned to operate for three months (term 1), but the participants decided to continue for another three months (term 2). The group's activities and research data are presented in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

The first term began brainstorming for ideas. Along with a few social workers, the group leaders had been running a monthly 'service café' where they offered counselling and coffee to people waiting in the food distribution line. After the group members visited the service café and interviewed people there, the service users questioned whether they would be able to help due to the limitation of practitioners' resources. During the proposal discussion, the practitioners considered holding the service café in the waiting halls of the two social welfare offices. The group finally tested the co-produced new service café model in the lobbies of the two social welfare offices and in the food distribution line. A few indicators were defined and used for evaluating the experiments afterwards. The group concluded that the new service café concept should be piloted weekly, but they also expressed an interest in continuing brainstorming for new ideas.

In the second term, the group returned to brainstorming. One of the service users expressed her personal need to share experiences of poverty and everyday life as woman with peers. As this idea was discussed in the meeting, others brought up the need to discuss loneliness. Consequently, the group planned and tested two new peer groups, both consisting of six sessions. The



purpose of the peer groups was to provide a platform for the participants to discuss their difficulties, stigmas and identities, as well as to find support and solutions to practical problems. In designing these two peer groups, the experiential knowledge of the service users was crucial to find ideas and the means to put them into practice. Some group members also participated in the tested peer groups, along with new clients. Being part of the tested groups enabled the service users to observe, reflect and evaluate the experiments with professionals and other peer group participants.

Besides initiating, designing and testing their own ideas, the group members were consulted for a few draft papers produced by the organisation. Local universities and another municipality also invited the participants to share their experiences of the group with social work students and professionals in four seminars concerning service-user participation. Although not planned in the research design plan, during analysis, I was able to contrast the service users' experiences of being consulted and speaking publically with the experiment-driven approach and co-production of the experiments. I consequently analysed the importance of assessing the repercussions of one's actions to having a sense of agency, and to increase the experience of making a difference.

### ***Research Data and Analysis***

The research setting is a single-case study which, according to Robert Yin (2009, pp. 47, 49), is analogous to a single experiment. Consideration of the research as a pilot study of a new participatory method justifies focusing on a single case. The research interviews were conducted at two different stages of the process: half-way through, and at the end of the group sessions. Time variation in data collection can strengthen conclusions (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) and this is true of the study. Both data sets include an interview of the entire group,

a group interview of the professionals, and individual interviews of the service users (see Table 1).

All interviews were open in nature. I asked the interviewees of their experiences generally; their influence on the group; and the group's impact on them. In the group interviews, the professionals also shared their experiences, allowing dialogue between the participants. The data consists of transcribed interviews totalling 282 pages (Times New Roman 12) in Finnish. The quotations in this article are translated by the author.

The data was analysed with content analysis. First, the data was divided into two categories: service users' experiences of having an influence on others, and how the service users felt the group influenced them. The quotations in the first category were grouped according to being or not being able to influence, and these experiences were contrasted in the group's different activities. Experiences in the second category were organised according to effects to the service users' citizenship, social relationships, and personal daily lives. After this analysis, the data still appeared to contain material on the tensions related to the group's experiments and participants' roles. Thus, I organised the third category according to the different relationships influencing the service users: practitioners in the group, the organisational context, and other service users. The conclusions were discussed in the group.

Practitioner research arguably enhances organisational learning, and improves service outcomes (McBeath & Austin, 2015; Shaw & Lunt, 2011). Combining practice and research can be challenging. My previous work experience as a researcher social worker affected my professional identity and increased my research skills. This eased the negotiations and uncertainty practitioner researchers seemed to face (Shaw & Lunt, 2011). My position as team manager, reframing the research to appreciate organisational development opened doors for the research. The research was also supported by a grant which enabled me to take a study-leave from work.

Reflective distance enhances the reliability of conclusions along with the transcribed data, and the movement between de-familiarising and revisiting the observations (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p. 58).

The service users and professionals were informed about the research before the group started. I related the research conditions to interested participants: participating in the research was voluntary, declining would not affect their status in the organisation, and data would be anonymised. Before the recorded interviews, I also asked participants to sign an agreement form with the same information. The municipality's research board approved the research. In reporting the results, I refer to the participating service users as 'clients', because they considered 'client' neutrally described their position, without using the clumsy term 'service user' (see Hubner, 2014, p. 96).

## Results

### *Participating in Developing Services: Being Heard and Influencing on Service Practices*

My data involves two levels of participation: the experiences of *only being heard* and *influencing practices*. During interviews following the group's activities, clients wondered about the effect of their ideas on the organisation's practices or the attitudes of the civil servants. The suspicion of an individual's or group's ability to initiate change or influence the bureaucratic organisation reflects the history and power structures of public municipal social welfare. Clients doubted the organisation would change, or believed that if it did change, it would take a long time as a client describes:

C7: I believe that next generation getting to the bureaucrats' positions will have a different attitude, perhaps.

When the clients elaborated on their distrust of the organisational change, they reflected not only on their experiences of participation generally, but also more specifically on their experiences of the four group-sessions. In those meetings, the group had been asked to comment on some of the organisation's draft papers. The evaluated drafts were designed by professionals and they were separate from the group's developmental work. The participants contributed to improving the preliminary papers by their comments. The clients themselves, however, were uncertain if their feedback and comments caused any changes at all.

Clients appreciated being asked their opinions, and feeling they had knowledge to contribute. They felt that the practitioners' intentions and motivations to involve them appeared honest. Thus, they felt they were at least heard, although it was unclear if they made any difference as a client points out:

C3: People are sceptic towards the possibility of changing things. But that we have been asked and the situations have been really good. – People start to believe that we are wanted to have a say from our part if things could be influenced at.

This experience of being heard can be described as the first and still tokenistic level of participation, in comparison to the experience of having an influence and agency in initiating change.

The shift in the data from the experience of being heard to the experience of actually having an influence appears to be dependent on what was developed, and how this was accomplished. In the following excerpt, clients expressed the felt opportunity to influence the organisation's practices through the group's own experiments and concrete action:

C3: Yeah, we are doing something concrete, not only chatting about stuff.

C6: Or at least I think we are trying, but I don't know if it's leading to anything.

C3: Well, it leads to something every Thursday, when you are in the service café and you hand out coffee to people and talk about the Culture Pass. Then, you've done something really concrete.

C6: Well, yeah, I've accomplished some of that. And one guy I know also came to the food distribution line.

C7: Yeah, and you were in that group, the one we designed for people living alone?

C4: Yeah.

C7: That took off too.

The experience of having a say that makes a difference relates to observable and concrete results of action, in contrast to 'only chatting about stuff'. Participating in the co-production of services enabled the clients to notice the consequences of the group's action on other clients, and to observe how the group's ideas were put in practice.

Consideration of the consequences of behaviour as an important element in having an impact was emphasised by clients' experiences from different seminars. The clients felt that the seminars were truly influential arenas, due to the opportunities for public speaking and sharing one's own experiences with a wider audience. The immediate feedback from listeners at the seminars confirmed for the participants that they had made a difference.

The participants thought co-designing the service café and peer group experiments, as well as piloting the service café and co-producing it regularly, was inspiring, motivating and made them feel their efforts could make a difference. The experiment-driven approach enabled designing and accomplishing things on a small scale rather quickly, as the peer group experiments demonstrated. The strength of designing an experiment and practically testing the idea was the direct feedback received during the experiment. The shared experiences in action stirred reflection in

the post hoc meetings; being involved in the service experiments enhanced the experiences of having an influence, and raised the level of participation.

### ***Consequences of Participation: Gaining a New Agency***

Besides the experience of having an influence, the clients recognised participating in the group had effects of them personally. I will first list these effects, and then discuss each in more detail. Firstly, the clients described how participating strengthened their sense of citizenship, in contrast to the limitations of their previous agency as objects of social work. Secondly, participation provided them with social relationships and, thirdly, it helped them manage with personal illnesses, problems and other struggles in their daily lives.

My first point related to how the new position in the group transformed the clients' previous negative identities into a more positive status of an expert-by-experience. Although the clients had struggled with low self-esteem, the approval and respect they received in the group was significant for their identity formation as Honneth (1992) has previously presented in his critical theory of recognition. The clients described how their past experiences were considered worthy in the group; it was empowering to hear how their experiences could be of use in helping others. The appreciation and recognition of their experiential knowledge raised their self-esteem and replaced their experience of marginalisation regarding citizenship, evident in the following quotation:

C3: Well, this has been really empowering in every way, if you think of all the bad descriptions like 'poor' or 'unemployed' or 'ill' and what not. Well, 'in debt'. All these have been twisted around, like 'it's really good that you are, so tell us what we should do?' So actually this B-citizenship is valued. --- So it's like, oh

my god, it changes your whole posture, like ‘hey, I’m a professional of poverty and I’m quite good at this’.

The clients appreciated how the group offered a way to influence people’s attitudes of poverty: the new peer groups allowed the clients to share their experiences of poverty, and the service café in the food distribution line created a platform for underprivileged citizens to collaborate and be visible. Participation in different forums was important ‘so that you don’t feel like you will never be able to get in touch with the real people’, as a client (C2) phrased it. The clients’ previous identities had been shaped by constant poverty, and so the new agency and recognition as experts in social services was meaningful.

My second issue involved how clients observed the positive consequences of their social relationships. They appreciated the new friendships and the sense of belonging to the group. The experienced feelings of loneliness diminished due to participation. Participation and membership also requires social skills, as a few clients pointed out. The group had given them courage to be among people, and helped them to manage their anxiety in social situations. One of the clients (C7) described how he had learned to respect his own limits and to withdraw himself from interaction for a moment when needed. Having the courage to express one’s own wishes and to refuse participation is an important aspect of an individuals’ agency, although refusal to participate in this case was only temporary. Strengthening clients’ social skills lays the foundation for individual participation in influencing public organisations.

Clients’ recognition of how their participation in the group also had positive outcomes in their daily lives is my third point. The clients reported that the group supported their weekly rhythm and provided meaningful activities. Participating in the group cheered the clients up and also gave them energy to accomplish other things, like cleaning up at home. A few clients reported

alleviations in their depression, and one client (C6) found the group had reduced his alcohol abuse. He describes:

C6: For me this has been more educative, so I've been bettering this world, trying to make it better in the pub for 50 years. I've been like a cosmos, talking about politics; something that I've had no clue of. So this [participating in developing] is better. I even lost my flat in the past life.

To conclude, participating in service development was empowering for the service users; it opened a new kind of agency to them. The experience of having an influence, receiving recognition which improved self-esteem and having mastery over one's life arguably improves participation. To enhance participation, diminishing the hindrances caused by social fears or other problems individuals struggle with is important, and also to find different ways for people to participate.

### ***Negotiations of the New Positions and Building Trust in the Group***

Planning and designing services involves uncertainty; the end product is open and unformed during the process. Establishment of the group did not involve a clear definition of the services to be designed. This allowed a wider space for the participants to negotiate and contribute in defining the goals, methods, and roles. Negotiations of the new roles and positions, significant to the service users' participation and agency as discussed above, took place with the practitioners participating in the group.

In adult social services, the relationship between a client and social worker is characterised by both control and support. This also limited the mutual relationships between practitioners and clients in the group at the beginning of the study. According to a few clients, joining a group



involving professionals was at first intimidating, and building trust took time. The clients especially considered the informal and personal stories shared by the professionals as significant acts to create trust and mutual encounters.

As Suzanne Hodge (2005, p. 174) pointed out, a discursive inequality exists in sharing personal matters between clients and professionals. The professionals' first attempts to open up their lives to the clients is evidence of this. The professionals often described their sports hobbies as a way to share something personal, but not too personal as sharing problems of their private lives would have seemed unsuitable. Later on, one of the clients described how practitioners' positive stories were at first troubling:

C2: The starting position was that you are better people, working people, social work people and then you look – like what before has been thought – down to us scums 'who don't even exercise as I did today'.

However, during the second term this did not bother the client anymore, as the practitioners became familiar.

The new positions were also challenging for the professionals. For example, one of the practitioners found it difficult to criticise colleagues in front of the clients. Open dialogue concerning the group's activities is not necessarily easy in the frame of the organisational culture of collegial loyalty and face work. Another practitioner revealed her earlier worries of whether the clients would have negative or reserved attitudes towards her as a representative of the profession.

Towards the end of the research period, communication and collaboration between the clients and professionals improved with the new positions and a growth of a mutual understanding, as evident in the social workers discussion:

SW1: I wonder how the clients feel when we emphasize that we are group participants. I think it's pretty good for them, or at least I've experienced that it eases being together and communicating.

SW2: Yeah, because if I have now understood maybe a little more about the clients' position so the clients have probably understood a little more about our workers' positions and that a social worker is just a human.

The group enabled more equal encounters by creating distance to the bureaucratic casework setting in the social welfare office and the relationship of the clients and professionals developed towards a kind of partnership. The partnership can be defined as negotiating of shared activities within the limits the organisation had delegated power to the group (Arnstein, 1969). However, the partnership was not only a matter of using power but also a collaborative and dialogical learning process based on mutual recognition, learning from each other as well as negotiating about the plans. The collaborative partnership reminds Dewey's (1997/1916, p. 87) understanding of democracy that is 'primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience'.

### ***Participation and Organisational Structures of Power***

The clients' participation was shaped, firstly, by their relationship to the professionals in the group. The practitioners' agency in mediating between the group and the organisation was a fundamental condition for the clients' participation. The group practitioners negotiated the group's activities, and implemented feedback or ideas in the organisation. My position as team manager would likely grant more freedom to the group, and advance the negotiations within

the organisation. The professionals in the group can operate as gatekeepers, enabling participation of service users by influencing the services. Although when influencing and developing practices, power is unequally distributed between professionals and clients, it can also be shared.

Secondly, clients' power and influence of the clients was conditioned by the organisational practices, policies, structures and management. Operating in practice revealed power structures, as the organisation responded to the groups' activities. For example, in one of the service café experiments in a social welfare office, staff raised the issue of whether the clients hosting the café could access the practitioners' cafeteria to use their coffee machine. As discussed in social work research, in this case, the physical social work spaces seemed territorial and related to power (also Eräsaari, 1995).

The other professionals working in the social welfare office felt uncomfortable having the clients around, as they could be discussing their work or even joking about it. The professionals' unfamiliarity with the volunteering clients, along with group leaders not sufficiently informing them about the situation resulted in tension. This also reflects the dividing line between the roles of a client and a practitioner, more thoroughly discussed between the participants in the group. The organisational culture regarding participation and experimenting thus shaped the clients' agency.

The power positions between an organisation and a client can also effect clients' participation. During the research, one of the clients considered quitting the group because of a disagreement about a living allowance decision. On the one hand, the client doubted if it was possible to continue developing services while in court with the organisation. On the other hand, the client was reluctant to ask the group leaders for help to avoid taking advantage of their position in the

group. The matter was solved by discussing the misunderstanding related to the living allowance decisions. Despite their new positions, the clients remained under the organisational policies.

Thirdly, the clients' agency was also shaped by their relationships to and encounters with other clients outside of the group. Their position in the group made them feel like mediators between other clients and professionals, as they could explain issues from both perspectives and could influence other clients' negative attitudes:

C3: We understand more of the bigger picture and as we get to know practitioners people as people, we can share this further and so clients' and practitioners' attitudes to get little better.

The clients' mediating agency was also directed towards influencing the professionals and operating as spokesmen for other service users. The clients recognised distress and needs in their encounters with other users. At times, seeing these vast needs and problems was contradictory to the small scale of the experimental approach, and the speed at which the clients felt changes proceeded in the organisation.

It may be more challenging for service users who have been marginalised from working life to participate in developing services than for customers to influence commercial services. Comprehending the limitations of the organisation's resources and culture, while at the same time sensing the need for help, can be frustrating. Whether service users should even comprehend the limitation of the organisation is relevant, as it can limit the innovativeness of the ideas produced.

Finally, conclusions based on the empirical data include service users' agency and participation being shaped by other agents. The professionals and organisation operating as gatekeepers in

sharing, or not sharing, the power defined the level of participation. Participation was also advanced by the trust among participants, raised self-esteem and improvements in social skills, as well as the rehabilitative outcomes in the service users' daily lives. Further case study-research would reveal whether and how these conclusions of the outcomes and conditions would vary between and among different participatory models.

## **Discussion**

In this study, I have examined experiment-driven innovation as a method for enhancing service-user participation in developing public social services. Participatory groups can give service users a voice, and the experience of being heard, but not always the experience of having had an influence. The difference in the experiment-driven innovation approach is that any influence can actually be evaluated and reflected upon in practice. To strengthen service users' agency, communicating what is done with the feedback and suggestions is crucial, along with applying methods to enhance this communication.

The collaborative experimentation element of this research provided a means for the organisation to apply service users' knowledge and involve clients in designing new or enhancing existing services. Although the organisation initiated the group and the focus of its development activities, the group was not only used for approving managers' or professionals' proposals which, according to service-user involvement critiques, often happens (Arnstein, 1969; Beresford, 2013, pp. 145–146; Cowden and Singh, 2007, pp. 16, 19). The group allowed front-line staff to work with the service users, and make propositions to the management based on experiential knowledge. Thus, the experiment-driven approach enables a sharing of power, and could respond to the need for front-line staff and service users to reclaim and construct new emancipatory practices collaboratively.

I agree with the necessity for user-led associations to raise wider issues, and that involvement of larger groups is required for democracy and participation. Although experiments can be designed and conducted quickly, the process of developing services or changing practices requires time. For example, advocating for national policy changes on the basis of experiential knowledge would require many years, several negotiations, and persistency. However, practical prototype testing can raise controversies and allow dialogue. As verbal communication can be difficult for service users, more practical approaches can lower the threshold to participation for many.

Social work practice research and research based on the pragmatist research tradition allows evaluation of research results in practice and for practice, as well as influencing the practice. In my study, practitioner research supported developing new activities beneficial to the organisation and service users. Meanwhile, developing practices enabled conducting research and reflection on the theoretical discussions of participation and agency. In this empirical study, being a practitioner aided negotiations to establish the group, provided a deeper understanding of organisational practices, and enabled reflection of analysis with participants, as well as using the results to improve the group's practices.

However, empirical research has its limitations. My position as a practitioner and researcher may have influenced the analysis and conclusions, although the transcribed interviews, reflection with academic peers, and study leave gave me a reflective distance. Possible alternative methodologies include a discourse-focused approach, which would have allowed a deeper analysis of the power relations that were unveiled (Hodge, 2005, p. 177), or ethnography, which would have allowed more detailed data. The two interview rounds conducted, along with the variation of time, however, enhanced the validity and reliability of the results achieved.

The case-study conclusions are based on a small group of participants. Their experiences may have been shaped by unseen factors that cannot be controlled in a research setting. Therefore, the positive consequences of the participatory method may result, for example, from coincidences or other events in the participants' lives. As my conclusions are based on a single case, further investigations of the role of participatory methods are needed. However, in my opinion from my middle-manager's perspective, experimenting is a feasible way for social workers and service users to innovate amidst a hectic social work practice. In change processes, experiments can help the social service organisation to navigate and avoid the shipwrecks of unsuccessful planning, vain investments and dismissal of workers' and clients' experiential knowledge. In light of this research, I consider the experiment-driven approach an interesting method for developing collaborative social services.

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	<b>TERM 1 (3months)</b>	<b>TERM 2 (3,5 months)</b>
<b>Contents of the development work</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Collecting ideas by attending a seminar, a workshop and the service café in the food distribution line</li> <li>Brainstorming the service café concept and carrying out two more experiments in the social welfare office lobbies and one in the food distribution line. Finally, deciding about moving on to the piloting phase.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Continuing piloting the new service café concept</li> <li>Proposal of two new peer groups and testing the group ideas (6 sessions each group)</li> <li>Service users lecturing in four seminars</li> <li>Commenting on the organisation's draft papers</li> </ul>
<b>Group sessions &amp; events</b>	Weekly group meetings, including planning sessions and experimenting sessions (3h/meeting, total 13 meetings)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Weekly group meetings (3h/meeting, total 15 meetings)</li> <li>Piloting of the service café once per week (3h/ café, twice monthly in the food delivery line and once monthly in the social services offices A and B (total 11 service cafés)</li> <li>Peer group experiments 3h/meeting, 6 meetings/group</li> </ul>
<b>Participants of the group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2-5 service users</li> <li>2 group leaders</li> <li>1 practitioner researcher</li> <li>2 social workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7 service users</li> <li>2 group leaders</li> <li>1 practitioner researcher</li> <li>(2 social workers, attending only 50 % of the sessions)</li> </ul>
<b>Research data</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group interviews of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the whole group (7 p)</li> <li>the group leaders (2 p)</li> <li>the social workers (2 p)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Individual interviews with the service users (5 p)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Group interview of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the whole group (9 p)</li> <li>the group leaders (2 p)</li> <li>one social workers with one group leader (2 p)</li> </ul> </li> <li>Individual interviews with the service users (7 p)</li> </ul>

Table 1. Conducting the study; group activities and research data (p = participant).